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## ABSTRACT

The application of adult education principles and theories in the workplace was examined through a study of adult education activities in the following workplace settings over a period of 10 years: the Indiana State Department of Health; the Indiana State Department of Correction; a business in the private sector; and the Indiana State Commission on Persons with Disabilities. The following were among the more than 30 different concepts or principles of adult education identified in the 4 workplaces: project- or problem-centered learning; phenomenology; reflection-analysis-action; intention to inform rather than entertain; participation training; process as product; humanist orientation; well-defined vision/goal; critical thinking; focus groups; applied technology; knowledge of life stages; and use of teams as a data source. The following were among the study's conclusions: (1) learning concepts, theory, and techniques learned in the classroom setting are indeed transferable to the workplace; (2) for adult education to remain relevant in a rapidly changing and technology-oriented workplace, it must shed its "classroom-conference-training session" image and move into the mainstream of the work force's work programs; and (3) to be successful, adult educators must be placed in a position of authority and have direct linkage to and support of top management. (Contains 42 references.) (MN)

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## ADULT EDUCATION PRINCIPLES IN ACTION IN THE WORKPLACE

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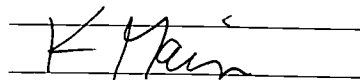
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## Adult Education Principles in Action in the Workplace

### ABSTRACT

In the eyes of some adult educators, the obvious link between theory and practice, between principles taught in the classroom and application of those theories or principles in the workplace is often tenuous at best. Yet, if adult education is to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, it must expand beyond its “training session and conference” image.

This paper examines some basic principles and theories taught in the classroom of an adult education program and how and where the principles and theories were put into action in four workplace settings over a period of ten years. It addresses the question “why am I doing this”.

Three key conclusions include the relevancy of the principles. The fact that placement within the organizational structure is critical. In this case, placement was with the support of the State Health Commissioner (CEO). This in turn promoted a culture of learning within the State Board of Health, other units of government and the private sector.

### Focus and Background

The main thesis of this paper is that (1) the basic concepts, theories, and principles of adult education can be applied across the fields of both the profit and not-for-profit sectors of the workplace, and (2) adult education will remain relevant in a rapidly changing and technology oriented future provided it sheds its “class room - conference - training session” image and its basic principles are applied within work programs of organizations.

The background for this paper is a record of a selected sample of practical interventions in which I applied adult education concepts, theories and principles in my primary place of employment. I taught courses for 17 years as an adjunct faculty member in the Adult Education Program at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis and, simultaneously, was employed full-time at the Indiana State Department of Health.

Over these past years I have consistently applied the concepts and principles of adult education and learning in multiple projects within the workforce environment. Some of my observations and applications are contained in this paper. The applications are all based on theories, principles, and concepts used in the Adult Education Program at Indiana University.

The author of a recent book *Working Wisdom*, Cohen and Aubrey (1995) kept asking people, over a period of time, where and when did their major learning episodes occur? No one responded with workshops, conferences or training sessions. Learning was occurring “on the job” or most effectively courtesy of a non-dogmatic mentor, a high pressure project, a major screw up or a career change, i.e. beyond the traditional roles of adult education. This is not to suggest that there is not a legitimate role for such traditional learning activities. Fulghum (1995) suggests that conferences can serve to kindle or rekindle a sense of community, ritual or time of renewal. But this paper

suggests rather that we must go beyond these roles and create a culture of learning in the workplace. Let me illustrate from my years of experience both as an adult educator and simultaneously a director of a research in a state agency.

While some of the practices are not necessarily new, what is new is the sound basis in theory for the practices.

### **Applications and Concepts/Principles**

This section is organized in a straightforward format, four diverse workplaces are included: a state department of health, a state department of correction, a business in the private sector, and a state authorized commission. Adult education principles (learning concepts) are identified for each of the four workplaces. Each adult education principle is in bold type for ease of identification. The adult educator or source of the principle of learning concept is identified. One or more examples are provided to illustrate the application of the principle.

#### **Indiana State Department of Health**

##### **1. Project or Problem Centered**

**Adult Learning is Project or Problem Oriented.** Crucial to learning within the adult experience is to strive to solve problems or complete projects. Rarely is the adult motivated to learn unless a problem (need) exists or a project is deemed important (goal). Knowles (1970)

##### Examples

a) We learned to use “one time only” task force meetings to review the results of a working draft of a staff report. It was a two pronged approach. First we used an Internal Revenue Group (IRG) i.e. members within the agency and then an External Review Group (ERG) i.e. members outside the agency. Time is at a premium for knowledgeable people. If they know it is only one

meeting, they tend to prepare and participate. While at the same time they are reluctant to commit to a 3-year committee membership.

b) I was requested to and did facilitate a two day problem solving session on options to close a state mental health facility and still serve its patients. Attendees: Representatives of the Governor's Office, Representatives of the Division of Mental Health, CEO of mental health centers, advocates and consumers.

## **2. Phenomenology**

**The central task of phenomenology is analysis of the lived-in world over a specified period of time. A quest for the essential in experience.** Adult learners and project managers use the concept of phenomenology even if they are not aware of the name. Moustakas (1994) Main (1995) and Strange (1987)

### **Example**

I was a member of a grant writing team that failed miserably in the non-completion of the task. We even missed the deadline for submission. I then turned to a "phenomological" approach to understand the reasons for the failure. We undertook a critical examination of what went wrong with the failed grant writing process that was "within a defined time frame". i.e. From the initial decision to write the grant until we gave up on the project. We then were able to understand what went wrong and include proposed solutions to avoid such failures and increase the likelihood of success.

## **3. Ask the Right Questions**

**Finding the right answer is usually the function of asking the right questions.** (Socrates and Einstein)

Example

The task was to frame the evaluation questions on a project titled “Children with Special Health Care Needs” for a contract. The task force had met three times without success. I was then requested to assist the task force. The task was completed in one meeting by asking the right questions. The three critical questions to almost any such data project are: (1) What is it you really need to have without which the project is a failure? “Need vs Want” (2) Where is it? and (3) How do I get it?

**4. Reflection - Analysis - Action**

**Immerse yourself in a problem; once you hit a snag, let it set and simmer in one’s subconscious, think, then “eureka” a solution.** Friere (1968), Apps (1973), Brookfield (1987), May (1978), Mezrow (1990) Marsick (1988)

Example

We were engaged in a difficult year-long process of developing a “first time ever” State Based Plan for Access to Primary Health Care for the Medically Under served Population by County 1995, Indiana. Numerous times we were “stumped” by a problem for which we did not have the answer, so we walked away from the problem, analyzed it, let it set, reflected on it, then came back together with the solution.

**5. Inform vs. Entertain**

**While learning can sometimes be “fun”, the bottom line is to learn. True learning results in action, change in behavior, thought, or shift in the learning process within the “interior-life”.**

Skinner (1972) Apps (1996) and former introductory statement on PBS New Hour with Jim Lehrer

“Our task is to inform, not entertain.”

Example

The State Board of Health sponsored a multi-media workshop for forty managers. It was a hilarious and entertaining session. However, a follow-up evaluation of the workshop revealed that not one person could identify a concrete action that they took based on the workshop or noted a change in thinking or behavior.

**6. Participation Training (P-T)**

**Facilitating a group processor what McKenzie calls a “structured conversation” is a learned skill but is transferable to many projects.** Participation Training unique to Indiana University, Adult Education program. It is a form of small group process that includes collaborative program planning and implementation; emphasis on functional aspects of group cohesion, consensus decision making, shared leadership, and program evaluation. McKenzie (1991)

Example

A former student who was aware of my skills as a facilitator in the PT small group process, invited me to a half day staff retreat to try to gain consensus on the mission and vision of their success for their physical therapy department. Considerable differences of opinion existed. It was a difficult session but we arrived at a consensus statement, except for one issue for which consensus was not achieved. In this era in the United States, we should recognize that some issues or beliefs are just not amenable to consensus building.

**INDIANA STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION (IDOC)**

The project to which the State Health Commissioner assigned me to was to develop a strategic plan for health for IDOC (30 facilities, 30 million dollar annual budget for medial care, 15,000 offenders.) A nine-member task force was established to engage in the year-long process.



The process used was based on a strategic planning process outlined in Bryson (1988 and later updates 1995 and 1996) and the androgogical model by Knowles (1970 and 1989)

### **1. Critical Point of View is Self-Awareness**

**Awareness of our own ignorance is the beginning of wisdom. (Socrates)**

#### Example

I was not (and still am not) an expert in the correction/offender system, but, an expert in the learning-reflection-action process and getting people with diverse backgrounds to work together for the common good. With this caveat we initiated both the planning process and learning project. I try to start each new day and new program by reminding myself that I “don’t know it all” and thus ask myself “Now what can I learn today?” i.e. take advantage of each opportunity to learn as the opportunity presents itself. Unless we are aware of our ignorance, very little learning can take place because we think that we already “know” the subject, issue, idea or belief or how to proceed with a project.

### **2. Process as Product**

**If the process is good, the product will tend to be good. M.McLuhan in Rogers (1969) and McKenzie (1991)**

#### Example

Instead of just “jump starting” the project, we devoted the first two meetings of the task force to examining options and assure that we had consensus on the process to be used to complete the project.

### **3. Humanist Orientation**

**Place a high value on the human being vs single-minded emphasis on B.F. Skinner and**

**outcome objectives. McKenzie (1991)**

Example

We did not develop outcome objectives for the project, rather we set the goal of a quality process and product. Outcome objectives were, however, included where they were appropriate i.e. in the objectives and recommended actions.

**4. Host - Guest**

**The adult educator is to act like a gracious host and treat students (task force members) as honored guests. McCluskey in Main (1979)**

Example

I secured a regular meeting room, had coffee and “goodies”, did not take phone calls, all agreed to turn off beepers, was always early, and available after the meeting to discuss questions, and tried to play the role of “gracious host” throughout the process.

**5. Participation Training (P-T)**

**Skill in participation training is the one essential to the adult education process and can be applied in multiple contexts. McKenzie (1991)**

Example

We did not appoint a chairperson in this fascinating experiment. My role was simply facilitator of the process. We used the small group process throughout the year with no “appointed” leader. This increased participation and open discussion of issues by task force members i.e. “think tank” approach.

**6. Preplanning**

The most crucial phase of any project is to spend the time and effort needed to “think

through” the project beforehand. The tendency is to just “jump in” and do it. This sets one up for squandered resources and problems. In paper, items a - d are considered part of the pre-planning phase.

**a) “Bits and Pieces”**

**If a project seems overwhelming, break it down into small manageable parts, small enough to allow for a reasonable work or learning schedule, and proceed. When the “bits and pieces” are merged the project is well begun or near completion. Elias and Merriam chapter on behavioristic adult education (1995)**

**b) Unfreeze - Move - Refreeze**

**In systems terminology, the strategy is to open the system (learning project) make process, then refreeze it to solidify gains before moving on. Lewin (1948)**

**c) Outline - Gantt Chart**

**One good technique is to outline the anticipated table of contents of the finished project as a first step and put it on a time frame (Gantt Chart) to stay on top of daily tasks or short term phases of your project. Knowles (1970) and Gantt (1979)**

**d) Common Values**

**Agree on the central core of the values or perspective to be applied throughout the process. Cohen and Aubrey (1995)**

**Example**

In the IDOC project it was a book on a realistic philosophy of medical care in the correction system that defined our core values. Each member bought and read the book as well as making a commitment to other learning concepts outlined in this section.

## **7. Planning Concepts Used**

### **a) Civilizing Process vs Barbaric**

**Civilization is only one generation away from descending to barbaric in-fighting. Bergevin (1967)**

#### Example

The correctional system can be an important setting to modify barbaric or socially unacceptable behaviors. The task was to work on behalf of improving the social fabric of society not only within the correctional system but upon release. This project was a good example of attempting to create a “civilized” medical care system within a corrections system and change behaviors that would carry over to the outside world.

### **b) Vision/Goal**

**Successful projects (people) have a well defined goal or vision of where they want to go or what they want to accomplish. Buhler (1968)**

#### Example

I noted that the task force was struggling and frustrated about half-way through the process. Therefore, we broke from the predetermined process and addressed the task of developing the mission statement (goal) and vision of success. Once they were able to enunciate the overall goal their spirit picked up. Refreshed, they continued the process.

### **c) Critical Thinking**

**Critical thinking defines a problem/issue, examines it, considers various potential solutions and chooses one that is “best”. Brookfield (1980) and Mezirow (1990)**

### Examples

After much discussion on the amount and type of medical care to provide to the offenders, the task force decided to recommend medical services covered by the Medicaid program in Indiana i.e. on a level with lower income citizens of the state.

The last two months of the project were devoted primarily to writing consensus statements, word-smithing, and completing loose ends issue by issue. We set work sessions by topic and task force members came as it fit their interests and time.

#### **d) Motivation (Push/Pull)**

**Two major theories of motivation are identified. People are motivated to action by either a good value (pull) or by a deficit need (push). Schaie and Willis (1991)**

### Example

This project was motivated by both a desire to do the “right” thing and to propose solutions to problems endemic to the correctional medical care system. i.e. motivation was both a pull and a push.

#### **8. Evaluation of the Project**

**The purpose of evaluation: obtain data and information to allow decision-makers either to retain, modify, phase out, or reinforce the project. Patton (1978)**

##### **a) Free Talk**

**Free, open, unconstrained, no limits dialogue is a key to solid learning. Koch on N.F.S. Grurdtvig (1952)**

Example

One end of project evaluation comment “everything was above board and out in the open” became a consensus statement when the evaluation results were discussed by the task force.

**b) 3-Leg Stool**

**Project design in adult education is like a 3-leg milking stool for cows. Lord (1976)**

Example

Leg 1	Adult educator/facilitator	myself
Leg 2	Content expert	IDOC Health System Coordinator
Leg 3	Participants	Diverse staff from correction facilities (and offender population via survey form)

**9. Implementation is crucial to any project**

**Theory without practice is empty. Practice without theory is blind. (I. Kant)**

Examples

External Validity of the working draft of the plan is an important step in any project. To accomplish external validity the task force circulated copies of the priorities and recommended actions to Department of Correction staff, administrators and staff of prison facilities. The plan was modified based on comments. Leaving a written record is important. Instead of just walking away at the conclusion of a project, keep a “project journal” that includes the major points, issues and process. That is to say, write down the process and evaluation results of the project for potential needs of future research projects or management.

### **Private Sector - Business X**

This was a year-long project. One staff person reported to a training division that had an advisory council. I served as facilitator/consultant. The research revolved around three questions: 1) is there a technician shortage? if so, 2) what is the magnitude of the problem? and 3) what are realistic solutions?

#### **1. Focus Groups**

**Use of focus groups are a viable research, evaluation and marketing tool.** Krueger (1993)  
Stewart and Shamdasani (1990)

#### Example

Four focus groups were set up to identify problems and propose solutions. We used the first focus group to develop the questions. The other three focus groups responded to the predetermined questions.

#### **2. Utilization of Participation Training (P-T)**

**Reinforce that facilitating a small group process is a learned skill but transferable to many projects.** McKenzie (1991)

#### Example

Throughout the project I perceived myself not as an expert but as a facilitator, co-learner, and resource person. My role in the focus groups was primarily that of facilitator. I was a resource person throughout the process, not an expert in Business X, and thus brought a “neutral” perspective.

#### **3. Applied Technology**

**Apply technology as appropriate.** Gailbraith (ed) (1991)

Example

We field tested technology by presenting the results via interactive video from a major city to the Advisory Council at the home base of Business X sixty miles away.

**4. Knowledge of Life Stages**

**Life stage development of adults is excellent background information in the working - learning process and can assist in anticipating reactions/questions, and responses within the learning process.** Hudson (1991) and Main (1993)

Examples

We established two focus groups using mature professionals in the field of enquiry; one focus group using young adults who were employed as technicians; and one focus group using high school seniors (both males and females).

Each focus group was different but reflected their life stage development and range of life experiences.

All participants expressed a commitment to training, education, and life-long learning as a solution to the problem along with aggressive recruitment and retention strategies

**5. Organizational Structure**

**Placement in the organization influences decision making and action capability.** Aubrey and Cohen (1995)

Example

Business X had a separate training center with an advisory council. However, it was not linked directly to the CEO, resources, and the decision making process. This lower power position within the organization tended to dilute implementation of any strategic action.



### **State Commission with Persons with Disabilities**

The charge was to develop a state plan for persons with disabilities.

#### **1. Use of teams as a source of data**

**Proper use of 10 - 12 member teams with diverse viewpoints can yield good solid data.**

**Intuition based on experience and consensus building as well as hard data lends credibility.**

Vella (1994) Bryson (1988) and McKenzie (1991)

#### Example

For this project we established eight teams to examine the issues and provide recommendations for action to be incorporated into the plan. (education, vocational training, employment, health, lifestyles, accessibility, advocacy, public information) Each team was a mix of providers of services to persons with disability, advocates, and persons with disabilities. This mix of viewpoints provided a “check and balance”, involved the affected parties, and kept the recommended action reality based.

#### **2. Use of off-site retreats**

**There is real value in convening groups at off-site facilities to enable people to get out of their normal work environment and concentrate on the task at hand.** Jackson & Cafarella (1993)

#### Example

In this project the eight task forces met on the campus of the School for the Hearing Impaired. This immersed the participants in a “real” disability setting and provided the learning atmosphere for serious dialogue. A separate 2 ½ day off-site retreat was held after the task forces had completed their work. It consisted of a seven member team appointed by the Commission to oversee the development of the plan. The charge was to edit, fill in gaps, organize, write an

executive summary, and “word smith” the plan for final review.

### **3. External validation**

**Any project requires external validation in order to determine if it is reality based, coherent, addresses the primary issues, is in line with community values, and has a reasonable chance to be implemented.** Bryson (1988) and Vella (1994)

#### Example

Three checkpoints were included in this process. The plan was reviewed and discussed with (1) state legislators assigned to the state commission, (2) the executive director of the National Commission on Persons with Disabilities and (3) persons attending the state conference on persons with disabilities. Within the conference agenda, the plan was presented, discussed and modifications accepted during workshops on each of the eight plan components.

### **SUMMARY**

The focus of this paper was to explore the application of adult education principles, theories and concepts in four diverse work places. My dual role as director of research for a state health department and part-time faculty in the adult education program enabled me to experiment and apply adult education concepts in the workplace.

Over thirty different concepts or principles have been examined as they were applied in work related projects. Principles, learning concepts, theory and techniques learned in the classroom setting are transferrable to the workplace.

This paper would also tend to confirm that for adult education to remain relevant in a rapidly changing and technology oriented future, it must shed its “class room - conference - training session” image and move into the mainstream of the work programs of the workforce.

This paper also reinforces Cohen's contention that, to be successful, the adult educator must be placed in a position of authority and have direct linkage to, and support of top management. Throughout these projects I had direct access to the state health commissioner and undertook the projects with either his tacit or direct approval.

Since I was the leader of a ten member research unit staff, the staff accepted and promoted the culture of learning within the agency. Other organizational units within the agency also frequently requested our assistance in "problem solving" on other projects. Thus the culture of learning was diffused not only within the agency but also to other units of government.

In a review of this paper, it became evident that the most used learning concepts revolved around participation training (small group dynamics), the basic principles of philosophy or theory building, adult development and learning and research principles integral to adult education.

The strategies outlined in this paper, if implemented, would tend to increase the likelihood of developing a culture of learning within the workplace and tend to keep the organization viable and competitive in an ever-changing social-economic climate.

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